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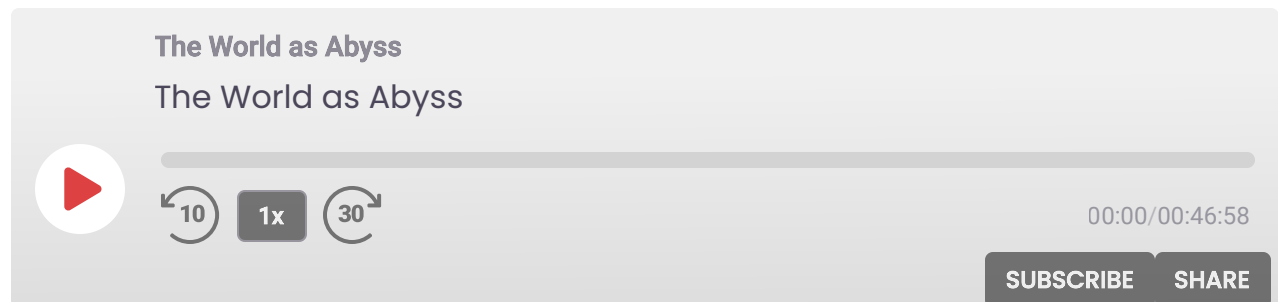
The World as Abyss

by Andrew Culp, Shauna Rigaud, Jonathan Pugh, David Chandler and Richard Todd Stafford | Issue 13.1 (Spring 2024), Positions

ABSTRACT Andrew Culp and Cultural Studies Association's Black and Race Studies Working Group Co-Host Shauna Rigaud discuss *The World as Abyss: The Caribbean and Critical Thought in the Anthropocene* (University of Westminster Press, 2023) with authors Jonathan Pugh and David Chandler. This podcast is accompanied by a scholarly commentary by Richard T. Stafford.

KEYWORDS Anthropocene, Caribbean, critical theory, modernity

Positions, Episode 3



Critique at the End of "the World"

By Richard T. Stafford

Some critical scholars have taken the “Anthropocene” and related concepts as provocations to deconstruct the “human” itself.¹ The false universalism implied by superficial mobilization of the “Anthropocene” concept has often been called into question by cultural theorists, giving rise to various related stories: the Capitalocene, the Plantationocene, the Thanatocene, and so on.² At their best, these accounts clarify the relationships between what Elizabeth Povinelli characterizes as the ancestral catastrophes of colonization, enslavement, and so-called primitive accumulation; the ongoing catastrophes of ecocide, exploitation, and dispossession; and the catastrophes to come, if anticipated changes to earth systems do not elicit transformative cultural, political, economic, and technological responses.³ But a different constellation of critical approaches responds to the crisis of political agency in the Anthropocene by broadening the concept of the social, drawing eclectically on Actor-Network Theory, new materialisms and vitalisms, concepts of the post-human, and indigenous cosmologies in order to deconstruct the culture/nature binary and bring other-than-human agents to the center of their stories.⁴ It is from these deconstructive responses that Pugh and Chandler’s intervention departs.

Such stories often explicitly claim that a turn towards non-human agency is necessary in order to make sense of environmental despoliation and climate change during a period characterized by the “seeming collapse of political possibilities,” as Pugh and Chandler put it.⁵ Those whom Pugh and Chandler critique make a range of related, but distinct arguments: sometimes baroquely theoretical and sometimes inspiringly concrete; sometimes troublingly apolitical and sometimes grounded in concrete struggles that mobilize alternative cosmologies, visions of community, and conceptions of polity to fight against fossil fuel development, dispossession of indigenous lands, and environmental harm. A kind of political pessimism lurks in the background of many such accounts: in the absence of classes, social movements, or other forms of human collectivity capable of taking on the challenges of our moment, perhaps the only path forward is to enlist in our struggles the relationships and processes that link

humans and other-than-humans together?⁶ However, when it comes to responding to climate change, dispossession, environmental despoliation, and exploitation, as Pugh and Chandler argue, it simply is not adequate to “pretend the world is going to do the work.”

Pugh and Chandler join critics of the ontological and relational turn, like Elizabeth Povinelli, in arguing that these ostensibly critical ontologies have no necessary political valence, notwithstanding the claims or assumptions of those who adopt these stances.⁷ Pugh and Chandler argue that these radically relational perspectives may, in fact, tend to enthrall us too much with the world as it is given, occluding political possibilities that are not legible within the stories modernity tells about itself. What is more, by undertaking forms of critique that are resolutely immanent in “the world,” Pugh and Chandler argue, these approaches risk disavowing and failing to take seriously the constitutive roles that historical and ongoing violence play in shaping how “the world” presents and is presented. A different critical standpoint, they argue, is necessary.

For them, this standpoint is found in what they call the abyssal ~~subject~~. The foundational violence of the middle passage violently stripped the abyssal ~~subject~~ of its relationship to “the world.” The cuts and exclusions that establish and maintain the global color line continue to deny many the status and capabilities associated with modern political subjectivity. This historical grounding of the abyssal ~~subject~~ in the violence of enslavement and colonialism is a catastrophe, but they argue that it enables a more radical critique of the world as it is.⁸ For them, the abyssal ~~subject~~’s emergence from these forces of history provides a standpoint from which to “problematise the human and the world” without “suggesting an alternative, obtainable world beyond.”⁹ So, the standpoint this ~~subject~~ has towards “the world as abyss” is in stark contrast to those who would reconstruct a world on the basis of a “politics of nature,” “a parliament of things,” or any of the other approaches to the Anthropocene that maintain continuity with the governing imaginaries of modernity, even as they deconstruct them.¹⁰ The

standpoint of the abyssal ~~subject~~ provides “a groundless-ground for a thorough-going critique” that rejects the lure of “the world,” understood not just to include what is empirically given, but also the ontological categories and epistemic grammars that “the world” takes for granted—as well as the various futures or utopian projections we might envision from within in it. In this, Pugh and Chandler draw on scholars like Sylvia Winter and Denise Da Ferreira da Silva who argue that the ontologies, epistemologies, values, and narrative figures taken to produce the effects of knowledge and agency in modernity are often not just historically determined by racial and colonial violence, but inextricably imbricated with—and contingent upon—it.¹¹

In listening to their episode of the *Positions* podcast, I imagine many who do cultural studies may—like me—find their scholarly commitments and methodologies called into question. What might Pugh and Chandler’s account mean for cultural studies researchers? What could it mean for me to reorient my critical practice towards the end of the world, rather than conducting cultural research and critique as if another world might be possible? What if “the world” itself is the problem?

In their critique of deconstructive, radically relational approaches to the Anthropocene, it is evident that Pugh and Chandler’s answer to such questions would involve what they call a “figurative mode of critique.” For them, the figure at the center of this all is, of course, the abyssal ~~subject~~, which they consider less as an empirically existing historical figure than a “structural perspective” lacking “ontological security.”¹²

To better understand the “figurative mode of critique” as the possible foundation for a method, it might be helpful to consider how they mobilize some of the entailments of this figure’s Caribbean origins in their critical interventions. Observing homologies between the deconstructive approach to the Anthropocene and the logics of global development mobilized by institutions like

the World Bank in the Caribbean, they use their figurative approach to suggest that this apparently critical stance reflects and reinforces “imaginaries of governing that enable hegemonic powers to rewrite themselves as not existing or just there.” By way of contrast, we might imagine alternatives to Pugh and Chandler’s figurative method of making such a case, perhaps proceeding from the homology between the critical discourse and the institutional logic to undertake a genealogy that would demonstrate the emergence of these analogous ideological forms from shared roots; an archaeology that might show the shared conditions of possibility for their similar discursive forms; a historical materialist account that could show how these particular imaginaries emerge from broader class dynamics and political economic structures; etc. Rather than providing accounts such as these, Chandler develops their critique of deconstructive approaches to the human in the Anthropocene by mobilizing another figurative entailment of the abyssal ~~subject~~—the Caribbean carnival:

But, to my mind, in terms of the Anthropocene, there’s a certain sense that it’s like an all-day, everyday ontological carnival [. . .] where the positions are reversed, where the mushrooms and the microbes have all the power and humans are subordinate [. . .]. It’s that sort of imaginary—that’s a deconstructive imaginary, of course—that permanent carnival is a process of opening and disrupting [which] is sort of problematic. I feel this sort of deconstructive imaginary is problematic because the mushrooms and the microbes aren’t really ruling. It’s a governing imaginary and humans are still ruling other humans, just through a different imaginary of how we should be conforming, behaving, thinking about the mediated links and these sorts of things.

In the first entailment, the figurative move reveals problematic homologies between deconstructive approaches to the Anthropocene and a top-down governing imaginary—neoliberal developmentalism—that has been institutionalized in the empirically-existing Caribbean; in this second entailment, the homology observed is between these same critical practices and the bottom-up improvisational spirit of the Caribbean carnival. At first blush, this might appear

to be a more favorable comparison. But, in their response to Shauna Rigaud's history of carnival and Crop Over festivals in the episode, I understand them to argue that, although the cultural forms of carnival and Crop Over may appear to open up established hierarchies and disrupt norms from below, they are nonetheless subject to recuperation by way of commercialization, commodification, and institutionalization. By this account, while carnival may appear to deconstruct power relations, it is unable to generate lasting change because it is "still taken in by the lure of the world." As in the case of their account of developmentalist governing imaginaries, the figural homology itself is mobilized to do the critical work on the Anthropocene concept, while the material world that gives rise to the figure's entailments is treated as secondary.

For me, as for many in our field, the attraction of the theoretical register is sustained by such evocative points of contact, but also by the frictions and contradictions between the concepts we mobilize and the worlds we study. But, as I understand them, Pugh and Chandler are suggesting a radically different standpoint: I see in their work a provocation to rethink the role of the empirical and how it is mobilized in relation to the conceptual in our field. Considering my own research from this vantage, I wonder: how might my methods of exploring cultural, political economic, and technological responses to climate change be different if, rather than developing them from what appears to be given, I tried to find methods that comport more closely with abyssal sociality? How might I rethink the principles of selection and exclusion, emphasis and de-emphasis, foreground and background that give shape to the stories I tell about flourishing and failing to flourish in a world with a rapidly changing climate, if I tried to tell my stories from a perspective more aligned with Pugh and Chandler's interventions?

While I ask these questions with the specificities of researching climate change and culture in mind, they might also be posed about many of the topics raised in this episode. For instance, when asked to bring their ostensibly Caribbean-inspired "figurative mode of critique" into conversation with the empirical realities

of race and history in the Caribbean, Pugh and Chandler largely demure, apologizing that they are “not drawn literally into the Caribbean as a place.”

While I acknowledge and admire their framing of this project as a “beginning” or point of departure, rather than the “end product” of a fully-worked out process, I wonder if—at this stage of its development as a critical practice—the radical suspicion they show towards the “lure of the world” ends up disarticulating their critical voice from the possibility of dialogue with concerns that do not map directly onto their archive. When listening, I wonder at times if the distinction between being “in the world” and being “a product of the world” that they mobilize makes it difficult to bring their concepts to bear on many consequential questions, including some of those that come up during the episode. Considering the provocative implications of their intervention for empirically-grounded critical work in cultural studies, we might fairly wonder how the “world as abyss” could help us understand the kinds of questions Shauna Rigaud raises about actually-existing Caribbean identity, the history of the carnival, and more. Might their suspicion towards the “lure of the world” render it difficult to attend closely to how, in fact, “humans are still ruling other humans”?

But it seems to me that many of their comments both in the podcast and the book show that they take interest in consequential issues that are products of “the world”: “there is,” they argue, “a desperate shortage of critical engagement which matches the contemporary situation.” This, it seems, goes well beyond the history of ideas and the unfolding of critical tendencies. Thus, perhaps the paradoxical work that remains to be done is to bring these concepts into closer contact with the affairs of the world—without being captured by its lure.

Audio Transcript

[00:00:00] **Andrew Culp:** Welcome to Positions, the podcast of the Cultural Studies Association, sponsored and published through the open source journal Lateral. Positions aims to provide critical reflection and examination on topics in cultural studies for scholars, students, and a general audience. Make sure to follow CSA and Lateral Journal on socials and subscribe to our podcast to keep up with new episodes.

[00:00:25] In this episode, the Black and Race Studies Working Group of the CSA hosts . The title of this episode is 'The World as Abyss,' and we are guided by **Shauna Rigaud**. Special guests are Jonathan Pugh and David Chandler. We discuss Pugh and Chandler's work on the Caribbean as an abyssal concept from the insights coming from their 2023 book, *The world as abyss: The Caribbean and critical thought in the Anthropocene* by University of Westminster press. Enjoy.

[00:00:53] Welcome. I'm Andrew Culp. I direct the CalArts Aesthetics and Politics Graduate Program in Teaching Critical Studies. Let's do some quick introductions, beginning with Shauna.

[00:01:04] **Shauna Rigaud:** Hey, everyone. My name is Shauna Rigaud. I am a PhD candidate in Cultural Studies at George Mason University. I am also one of the co chairs for the Black and Race Working Group in the Cultural Studies Association. I'm excited to be here today.

[00:01:22] **Andrew Culp:** Let's continue with Jonathan.

[00:01:23] **Jonathan Pugh:** Hi I'm Jonathan Pugh, and I'm the professor of Island Studies at Newcastle University in the UK.

[00:01:31] **Andrew Culp:** And David.

[00:01:33] **David Chandler:** Hi everyone. I'm David Chandler. I'm a professor of International Relations at the University of Westminster in the UK. I guess I work on the Anthropocene and political ontology type issues.

[00:01:44] **Andrew Culp:** We are so excited to have everyone here today. And why don't I throw it to Shauna, because you've developed such amazing questions to really drive the conversation.

[00:01:53] **Shauna Rigaud:** Thanks so much. Thanks so much. How we can probably start is also kind of talking about, like, just an overview of the book itself.

[00:02:02] **Jonathan Pugh:** As, as an overview of the book *The World is Abyss*, it's kind of getting into recent debates in, in border critical thought that engage the ongoing legacies of, of modernity.

[00:02:13] And these debates are increasingly turning to what in Western thought or European thought, North American thought, have often been thought of as quite liminal spaces. And the Caribbean is obviously one of these. We're very interested in how the Caribbean is kind of becoming increasingly prominent in debates about the ongoing legacies of modernity.

[00:02:33] And what we kind of are trying to do in thinking through the world as abyss, an abyssal ~~subject~~, an abyssal approach to critique, It's perhaps to explore how the ongoing legacies of modernity, the modern subject, the reworlding of the modern subject are perhaps a little more difficult and tricky to engage in and resist in than is often kind of foregrounded in [00:03:00] debates.

[00:03:00] So a lot of what *The World is Abyss* is doing is perhaps critiquing the way in which modernity keeps worlding itself in, in new ways.

[00:03:09] **David Chandler:** Our starting position might be sort of an impasse in critical theory. And me and Jon come at the problematic from our different

disciplines, human geography for Jon and international relations for me.

[00:03:23] And, I guess we're really drawn to the contemporary sort of ontological turn, you might call it, in critical black studies. Seems to be the most exciting sphere of generative thinking. And so we're sort of engaging within that sphere of issues. To sort of think about how that might help us to think about relational ontologies, problems of deconstruction, thinking about Laruelle, non philosophy, a whole range of critical frameworks can really be sort of thought otherwise through critical black studies work. So, in doing that, in looking at those issues, John is, as I said, a human geographer, a Caribbeanist as well. We were very much taken with how the discussions, largely North American slash Canadian discussions, drew very much upon figures of the Caribbean or imaginaries of the Caribbean.

[00:04:19] I mean, many forms of thinking do as well. But so we were just interested in maybe beginning our work of sifting through what's at stake in different ways of thinking about blackness or our ontology, different themes that come through, and sort of thinking about that and how we might then sort of grasp some of those stakes, and how then we might begin to start applying them in our own disciplinary areas.

[00:04:45] So I'm guessing quite often with books. You're, you're looking at an end product to the process, but for us the world is, abyss is very much a beginning, and it's been sort of useful for us to do that work, and we think a different way from which we might take some of those understandings forward. That's, that's really what the book is about.

[00:05:05] It's quite a mediated discussion of how the Caribbean might be drawn upon in certain discussions as we're thinking through how those things work. So the book is very much a book about how ideas might work and how ideas might work differently in order to do different things. So it's not, it's not really literally book about the Caribbean itself.

[00:05:25] That was just, a way in, maybe even an accidental way in.

[00:05:30] **Shauna Rigaud:** One of the things that probably might be helpful is kind of having a broader understanding of some of the, the, the vocabulary and terms that are used throughout the book. So what, what is the abyss, the abyssal subjects in the Anthropocene?

[00:05:46] Cause even in sort of this conversation as we're kind of starting is, there's this constant mention of the Anthropocene. And so wondering just for our listeners to kind of talk about that a little bit too.

[00:05:58] **David Chandler:** The idea of an abyssal subject comes from Glissant's book on, on relation. He starts off at the abyssal middle passage journey and the importance of the constructions of people without subject status.

[00:06:12] The loss of identity holds a grounding. And I personally think that that's really at the conceptual key to the Caribbean as a figurative. The Middle Passage, I think, does a lot of work for the ontological thinking in our contemporary moment, because the basis is that there is a new subject created.

[00:06:36] Now, there's a lot of different discussions, C. L. R. James has a different idea of the subject that's constructed in the Middle Passage. We're really just looking at how a particular imaginary is drawn upon today. That imaginary is that in the Anthropocene, to make the link, Anthropocene is understood, by some people, as the end of modernity, the sort of collapse of the hubris of a telos of progress where we can just reject the piles of bodies, the sort of extraction and the environmental issues. Modernity suddenly becomes re-written as problematic, and with that the epistemological and ontological assumptions that undergirded that and sort of disavowed the violences and dispossessions connected with it.

[00:07:19] But for us, we sort of think the link in contemporary thinking is the crisis of modernity, the crisis of the subject, the universal man, the human, as being able to access the world as objects in a universal way, calls upon a remaking of the subject. I personally think Sylvia Winter's work is fundamental. And so, she questions 1492, the decolonial moment of where we start from in terms of the epistemological wiping out alternative cosmologies and worlds. And she puts the Middle Passage at the center. And in her unpublished *Black Metamorphosis*, the work that the subject without a modern subjectivity does...

[00:08:04] ..is amazing, and it has a futural possibility that realizes that the different identities which were transplanted onto America cannot forge a world, it cannot forge a subject capable of living in the world, particularly in the Anthropocene, where we realize that previous subject projects have failed.

[00:08:22] So the lack of traditional subjectness becomes an asset. In modernity, that's like the worst thing possible. That transformation of what it means to be a subject, the work that the subject can do, the world that that subject relates to and works within, in that transformation, blackness and whiteness begin to be transposed or begin to be problematized.

[00:08:46] Attributes which were not attributes become attributes. And that's sort of the beginning of a set of discussions about what does that mean to be that sort of subject? And how do we sort of think about political ontologies? In different ways.

[00:09:04] **Andrew Culp:** Just a few pages into the book before you set up your own argument and the stakes of the argument, you mentioned a few different theorists, Glissant, who's probably a familiar name to many, Fanon, who's perhaps even a bigger name.

[00:09:16] You begin with this really remarkable block quote from C. L. R. James and you quote: "Wherever the sugar plantation and slavery existed, they imposed

a pattern. It is an original pattern. It's not European. It's not African. It's not part of the American main, not native in any conceivable sense of the word, but West Indian *sui generis* with no parallel anywhere else.

[00:09:40] **Jonathan Pugh:** If you think about someone like Glissant or many other authors, you know, they talk about the idea that the subject is, is kind of barred. It's not available or maybe in the language of Fred Moten, it's dissolved into nothingness in the abyss of the middle passage. So, as David was saying, the question then becomes, does the, does the subject become recouped into a kind of modern framework of reasoning?

[00:10:07] So, if you think about Caribbean independence, and emancipation even before that. For many, obviously, in the Caribbean, it's about this ongoing recouping of the Caribbean, as it were, Blackness into a kind of a liberal modernity. And if you just look at frameworks of the constitution, I think it's fair to say that they were very much about that.

[00:10:27] But what David was talking about are kind of the, the way in which there's an interest in other forms of subjectivity that are different from, from kind of modernity as it were, or the underside of modernity, the abyssal ~~subject~~ becomes this, this kind of barred subject of nothingness. Now we can talk about how that can be framed.

[00:10:47] So for someone— there are different readings of someone like Glissant, but I think it's important to probably talk about how they can be read differently. So some people would read Glissant as kind of a generative thing, so it's about relational becoming and generativity and creolization and carnival, it's all about generativity and affirmation of a different culture.

[00:11:08] But you can read Glissant differently in terms of focusing perhaps more on the opacity of it, the unavailability of the subject, the barred subject and so on. Now we take the abyssal ~~subject~~ in actually a slightly different way, but it's just to

kind of clarify that when Dave is talking about the interest in a subject that's different from that of modernity in the Anthropocene.

[00:11:30] That can be read in different ways and is being read in different ways and I think we're kind of seeking to interject into those debates and try and clarify what we mean by the abyssal ~~subject~~ and so forth.

[00:11:43] **Shauna Rigaud:** I think the idea of the Caribbean as the kind of, centering it as kind of this space, particularly as you mentioned the CLR James quote, right?

[00:11:54] I'm wondering in terms of the Caribbean itself, how do we get to thinking about the Caribbean as, as the place of the abyssal ~~subjects~~, right? Especially in, in kind of thinking about, sort of, the middle passage as a whole, why, why the Caribbean?

[00:12:11] **David Chandler:** In terms of the Caribbean, why the Caribbean? I'm thinking it's slightly arbitrary, even though we can construct the history and the Caribbean as the fulcrum of coloniality and the construction of the world and the construction of a bifurcated world.

[00:12:26] Through the global color line. I wouldn't necessarily go with a sort of a historically determined framework in the particular literature that we're looking at. I think it's much more of a figurative move. I think previously in a more modernist framework of critique of coloniality and racial capitalism...

[00:12:45] Then yes, the Caribbean is also going to be there then, but I'm very keen on the sort of the specificities of the contemporary world. And I have to say, I was relooking at Andrew's little chapter on Afro pessimism and, and non-philosophy, and the sort of, there's an argument already in the world of the, of a paradigmatic positionality that is not in the world, is not lured into the politics of the subject and the politics of identity.

[00:13:13] So you could sort of argue that, there's like a drive already to have an imaginary that enables us to locate a subject without the traits of subjectivity. And so I think different factors come together. I'm not necessarily able to distinguish different ones. Some of them are arbitrary and some of them obviously are less arbitrary.

[00:13:37] But the key point that we were trying to make in the world is this— is that the thinkers that we're thinking through are very much concerned with the debate around our ontology and what the debate around our ontology means different things to different people, some of those things we try and unpack and we've thought further from the work that we were doing.

[00:13:55] The key move like Fred Moten derives, he says, from the work of [00:14:00] Maham Dimitri Chandler, is a difference between real historical people in historical struggles who are racialized and forced onto one side of the color line. And Blackness as a concept that enables us to, to think with and think critically, think otherwise than we would do in, in other frameworks of critique.

[00:14:19] What's going on in that otherness is still pretty much open. How does it relate to Laruelle and French philosophy? How does it relate to Derrida? How does it relate to different frameworks of deconstruction? There's quite a lot at stake in these political ontological discussions of Blackness, which are not rooted in real subjects in history, but obviously they're related to critical, critical struggles.

[00:14:46] And what I want to sort of suggest is that, let's take, say, anti-Blackness rather than ontology. There's different ways into thinking through a vast literature. Let's say there's three types of anti-Blackness, because I like to work in threes. One anti-Blackness might be the racism of the world of modernity, the everyday excessive gratuitous violence and prejudice, you know. The literal, in the literal world, anti-Blackness you know, is, is. Now, in terms of the debates around ontology and fatigue and deconstruction, there might be two other types of anti-blackness.

[00:15:26] There are ways of thinking about an anti-Black world. In one of them, the anti-Black world is the world of representation, the world of all categories in which we are put in boxes, in which we are labeled, in which our individuality is negated. And in order to deal with that world of anti-Blackness, meanwhile engage in a deconstructionist project where we imagine the figurative subject without subject positionality, because it enables us to break all of those, those links and those barriers.

[00:15:55] It promises a world to come. And that world to come is understood, I guess, maybe it's like there's a Black undercurrent or a black underworld or a black real behind the world of oppression and division and the cuts. Now, that already sounds, all the different frames of anti-Blackness are valid and they do work, but they do work in different ways.

[00:16:20] And then the third anti-Blackness. would be a little bit critical of that deconstructionist understanding of the anti-Black world with another world to come underneath it. I was just reading Marcus Bay's *Trans Black Feminism* the other day. I think that they do that, that work really nicely in terms of the deconstructionist promise.

[00:16:43] However, Bay specifically makes the point that this only works when we understand that the world is not unrecoverably anti Black. When we realize in fact the, the, the real is Black, Blackness as excess, that beyond the inability to be captured and represented was in Black pessimism, Afro pessimism, the world as abyss —

[00:17:07] No, it's not—it's doing a different work to the work of deconstruction. It's trying to raise some, some of the stakes of that difference around politics, some of the stakes of that difference around what we mean by para-ontology, some of the stakes of what we mean by anti-Blackness and those sorts of questions.

[00:17:23] Now, those questions, me and John were at the beginning of thinking through, writing that book. For us, writing a book is research. It's more like the end of a journey. And for us, that project, and even looking at the world as it is today, we're, we're, you know we're making some useful moves there, but we're, we're not really completing the project.

[00:17:43] If it could ever be complete.

[00:17:45] **Andrew Culp:** Maybe just to add a little bit more context for some of our listeners too, you know, the metaphysical side for people who are, you know, readers of Spivak's Introduction to Grammatology, in which we get maybe that first strike out of being, that might be familiar. But for our cultural studies readers, maybe it's actually Fanon and that chapter "Black skin, white masks" of the lived experience of the Black man where he's, grows up in Martinique, and has this certain idea of what going to France might be like, where it's this place of promised human rights and equality and sort of like national identity and then he shows up and he is just sort of like, stared at by everybody on the street, including even little girls talking to their, their mothers. And he thinks that they're both like, looking past him and staring at him at the same time. He describes that condition as being trapped between infinity and nothingness.

[00:18:41] And so, what I'm hearing too is that we have a lot of readings that look at the sort of infinity of blackness as the sort of like, thing where there's so much content. It's sort of spilling out. It's hard to control. It can be very generative, but also scary and chaotic. And then there's the sort of nothingness side, [00:19:00] which has been mined a little bit less.

[00:19:01] Like what, what would blackness as nothingness look like? And so that's what I'm sort of hearing in this conversation too.

[00:19:09] **Jonathan Pugh:** Perhaps as with our previous book we did called *Anthropocene Islands*. You kind of just notice that the figure of the island and

island-ness becomes key to debates about the Anthropocene.

[00:19:20] They're all about relational interdependencies and these kinds of things. So it, as a geography, I, it, I'm, I feel it's almost inevitable that certain geographical forms or geography start to rise to the surface in these debates. The same perhaps with the Caribbean when we're talking about the abyss.

[00:19:38] Yeah. You know, it's there. As David was saying, it is almost arbitrary. It's just that perhaps the stakes have been clarified there, or been worked through in a particular way in those geographies. I think there's three ways in which you can think through this anti-Blackness. So if you think about the way in which the constitutions of independence created very liberal subjects, very liberal
[00:20:00] modern subjects, and then that creates a kind of literal racism in the world.

[00:20:05] Then you have this kind of second form of perhaps, way of thinking about Blackness as under erasure, precisely because of what's happened there. And the kind of trans Black feminism that David was just talking about, that text there, where it's about the kind of ungraspable force. And this starts with the kind of ungraspable force, perhaps a historical ontology, a social reality that's literally still in the world though.

[00:20:31] So what's being described in these moves of kind of.. or the under commons? They still exist in the world, yeah? They're kind of movements that are, yes, they're ungraspable. Yes. Creolization is ungraspable, carnival is ungraspable, these kinds of things, but they're forces in the, in the world that kind of suggests that there could be a push towards.. and I think they probably use these terms, a more liberatory subject, a more liberation that moves through these things.

[00:20:59] Now for David and I, a kind of meta political mode of critique, or a figurative mode of critique, is concerned with how these are still taken in by the

lure of the world. It's still the world of modernity. If you think about the way, say, Harney and Moten describe the undercommons, there's still, I think it's a beautiful description of how logistical capitalism works.

[00:21:22] Yeah, it's a description, it's an affirmation of how it works. Now for David and I, the kind of, the figurative mode of critique is very much concerned with how these are still taken in by the lure of the world. So we define the abyssal subject, as it were, in the text. Yes, it's a, it's a product of the world, but it's not in the world, as it were, in that sense.

[00:21:41] It's kind of.. not available to the cuts and distinctions of these kinds of subjects. So it's a kind of mode of figuratively looking at the way in which the subject still keeps welding itself in the world by taking a lure of the world.

[00:21:57] **Shauna Rigaud:** Well, let's talk about the international relations of it for the Caribbean, and kind of the different policies that are coming to attract different ethnic groups, or even what is happening in the rest of the world that may..

[00:22:12] ..force migration into the region for other ethnic groups. Because we've kind of framed this conversation, right as, as at least in dialogue with Black studies, but there is also this idea that the Caribbean itself, right, is also this collection of imagined Black nations where the Caribbean is..

[00:22:37] ..multicultural. And while we're talking about slavery and the Middle Passage, right, there are also other ways that capitalism has forced migration and labor into the region. So indentured servitude, can also think about the different migration of different ethnic groups, right? The Chinese, all these different
[00:23:00] ethnic groups coming into the Caribbean for labor and using the Caribbean, or the Caribbean using them, for labor and building capital.

[00:23:10] When, when we're talking about that kind of nothingness of the abyssal subject that sort of is grounded in the Middle Passage, as you talked about, like how do these other ethnic groups factor in?

[00:23:24] **David Chandler:** I do international relations, I guess, but I don't do literal international relations. I do more about imaginaries of governing, what enables hegemonic powers to rewrite themselves as not existing, or, just there to be enabling and custody building and being nice and unwhitening themselves and de subjectifying themselves.

[00:23:46] Our new regimes of governing and power are sort of projected. For me, that's sort of what's at stake in some of our critical understandings of deconstruction, because it seems to me that deconstruction has moved a long way from 50 years ago, and everyone wants to deconstruct themselves. You know, no one is like, proud of some past and some identity, some great big plan that they're going to impose on people.

[00:24:10] Everyone's sort of saying, no, no, you know, I'm just here for you and differences make differences, basically from a neo-liberalization of the World Bank and the IMF. Where they were just enabling people to do their own programs. Well, I mean, obviously the world looks the same, but the discourses are different.

[00:24:24] So, to my mind, that's what's at stake. And so, in the drive of deconstruction, there's a continual need to unmake the subject to have access to reality or to the world. And it's often understood that Western interveners can work on themselves to remove, to unlearn, to unknow development as a colonial discourse.

[00:24:48] In order to then do empowering work, and the empowering work they do is tending to resilience as a discourse of that, because resilience is not giving you specific capacities or training to do [00:25:00] something. It's really a

process of unlearning so you can be more sensitive, more attuned to changes in your environment, more adaptive. You're working on yourself in order to become in a world..

[00:25:11] ..of entangled and unexpected emergencies. So when we're sort of governed by a critical, deconstructive discourse, it's quite important, I personally think my job is purely a critical one, to think beyond that. I personally found the ontological discussions in Black studies drawing upon an imaginary or a figurative non-subject are able to do that, are able to work through how power can rearticulate itself, even without a world, even without a subject, even in the world of all we do is deconstruct.

[00:25:44] Some people can deconstruct better than others. Surprisingly enough, the same power relations and inequalities, hierarchies are reproduced through that. That's why I need to be thinking about the ontological turn in Black studies, because to me, that's the only space where the critique of deconstruction is real.

[00:26:02] It's grounded. It's historical. It's political. Okay, it's programmatic and figurative. But at the same time, it's, it's literally real, that's what draws me into that. So I apologize that I'm, I'm not drawn literally into the Caribbean as a place, I mean, I read about it and stuff, but that's not really where I'm coming from.

[00:26:22] **Jonathan Pugh:** Coming back to what we were saying earlier, certain geographies do just rise to the surface in these debates. So we were talking about the figure of the island and the Anthropocene that we're looking about. The questioning, you know, the questioning of the subject or the undoing of the subject that comes about through certain debates that are making their way up to North America through the Caribbean and writers like Gleeson and Brathwaite and to a certain extent Walcott, Fanon and so on.

[00:26:45] This is why they become so key. Let's take Benito Rojo, you know, writing about the Caribbean, the repeating island that expands out into the world.

That could very nicely be a metaphor for what you were talking about, Shauna. The elsewhere that undoes itself. This is how creolization has been framed. So when Benito Rojo talks about carnival, because of, I'll mention that because I know that's something you care deeply about, you can look at that in so many different ways, but there's an opacity to it.

[00:27:10] It's about the undoing of the subject, the unavailability of carnival to cuts and distinctions. If you start putting cuts and distinctions into carnival, you're, you're enacting a violence, yeah? But the carnival itself is also, it repeats the island, repeats the cuts and distinctions that expand out into the world, yeah?

[00:27:25] It's, it reveals them as kind of a falseness, yeah? So they're a raised subject. This is another way of maybe thinking about nothingness, Andrew. It becomes that force in the world, but that becomes then a literal force in the world that can be operationalized and kind of put to work as a kind of, in a sense, a liberatory movement.

[00:27:43] **Shauna Rigaud:** When we're talking about carnival itself in the Caribbean, we start with Trinidad.

[00:27:48] And so Trinidad itself had a history of a few kind of, colonial rulers, right? So it starts with the Spanish who were really unable to get the kind of planter system that other islands were profiting off of, particularly the British, and then invites the French to come and settle and start plantations on the island.

[00:28:14] And it's with the French, particularly, that the tradition of carnivals begins on the island with the planter elite class holding these masquerades and balls, right, just before Lent. So carnivals are a pre-Lenten festival or celebration, to then prepare yourself for the fast. What happens in Trinidad is really interesting because then there is a number of ways that the enslaved on the island began to participate in their own kind of festivals.

[00:28:46] And we know just theoretically with Bakhtin talking about carnival and the carnivalesque as sort of the world upside down, right? And so even with the elite planter class participating in the carnival, the kind of ways that they use masquerade both embody different power structures in there. And what you see with the enslaved population participating as well, they then were mocking their masters and participating in this kind of upside down. When the British take over the island, they come from a very different understanding of the role of religion. Catholicism allows for a little bit more flexibility for the Anglican Church, which is rooted where the British rule from. They did not see religion as a tool for expression or a space for expression, or sort of releasing the kind of social vows that carnival does.

[00:29:47] But rather, they saw that as a space for control. And so when the British take over the island, you can clearly see the cultural ways that the two rulers kind of set off. So once Britain takes over the island, there is a banning of carnival celebrations for the enslaved population. Even after emancipation, the British are still trying to surveil and keep those celebrations by the Black population..

[00:30:17] They prohibit those celebrations by Blacks on the island. And what then erupts are what they call the Canboulay riots, right? So there are riots around the country where the Black population are engaged in these protests about participating in the carnival experience itself. And that then marks carnival as grounded in an Afro..

[00:30:41] ..Trinidad, Tobago, or Trinbago as a term to describe the two islands. That then marks it as an Afro-Trinbagonian experience. So, Crop Over itself has a different history, where there is less of a bottom up approach to the festival itself. So [00:31:00] Crop Over originates similarly, right, in the pre-emancipation time.

[00:31:07] So, there began around 1786. Dinners and dances that were allowed by the enslaved from the planters to celebrate the end of the sugarcane crop, the

end of the harvest. These kinds of celebrations in its practice become very creolized because they start off as just kind of dinner and dancing, and then they start to incorporate more, sort of West African traditions..

[00:31:36] ..along with a British tradition. Originally, the name of those celebrations was called Harvest Home, which actually harkened back to a harvest celebration that happened in England. Because we understand, like, Agrarian societies traditionally had these practices of celebrating the end of harvest. And so this practice was familiar to the [00:32:00] enslaved, but also familiar to the planters.

[00:32:02] And they named it Harvest Home, right? Trying to sort of take that in. And so for Harvest Home, that again, that kind of bottom up is flipped, right? So this comes from the planter as a way to celebrate it. The Harvest Home celebrations were celebrations that happened sort of at different plantations across the island by the 1800s.

[00:32:19] And really, interestingly, even in spite of the outlawing and the banning of drums that you see across, kind, of British colonial islands in the 1800s, too, but these kind of celebrations are able to be had, un Barbados, only in the spaces where planters could observe. It was against the law to have any sort of faces that were just the enslaved population or before, prior to emancipation.

[00:32:50] As the island moves kind of from being Great Britain's most profitable sugar island, the plantations kind of decrease and you [00:33:00] see in the history of the Harvest Home Festival that the celebration starts to decline in the 1940s, although there is some archival evidence that sees that the Harvest Home Festival is still practiced in sort of smaller villages up until the 1960s.

[00:33:16] By the 1960s, there's also a move to start a carnival in Barbados itself, but among the elite Black class on the island, and mixed race class on the island,

and white class on the island. And so, they start these carnival celebrations in the sixties, but that dies out very quickly. Barbados gets its independence in 1966.

[00:33:42] By 1974, they start the Crop Over celebration, which they start to develop as a calling back to the Harvest Home celebrations, right? So there's now a need.. There are actually two really interesting stories about how [00:34:00] Crop Over starts, but, the one that kind of sits most atop all of them is that the Barbados Board of Tourism wanted to create a tourist event to start to fill the hotels.

[00:34:12] And so, in 1974, they developed this idea of Crop Over, hearkening back to the Harvest Home celebrations, and then incorporate the same sort of masquerade balls and fairs into the three week long event. What happens in 1974 is really interesting though, because the crop over celebration starts to incorporate where they have, sort of street kind of fair, where the island's population kind of come through and see that and start to call this and recognize this as a Barbadian thing and kind of reclaim it in a way that probably the tourism board did not..

[00:34:52] ..think about, right? So what then kind of develops is Crop Over. In essence, there's a turn where it's [00:35:00] in the early days of the celebration. There's a turn where it moves from just this tourism, right? Just this thing to fill the hotels during the slow season to something that is for the island's population, that is for the people.

[00:35:15] It's a, it's a recognition point.

[00:35:17] **Jonathan Pugh:** I think that plays in very nicely, I mean, whether you're talking about, say, something like the landship in Barbados for Crop Over or tea parties, is that, you know, all these different things, perhaps the way into what you're, you're talking about is this, for the scholars that were writing around the time of Derek Walcott and Glissant and so on, you would get things like the

argument being made that the banning of the African drum leads to the discovery of the steel drum, which leads to the point is improvisation emerges from violence, yeah?

[00:35:47] So perhaps what we're interested in is the way in which that improvisation gets enrolled. I think improvisation, as a, if you just think, I'm just gonna, just the end here of Benito Rojo on Carnival, where he talks about [00:36:00] improvisation being absolutely key to all this stuff and emerging from the banning of this, the violence of this, and so on.

[00:36:05] It reaches a point where, and it's interesting, he says, he frames it as calling it in a certain kind of way. So the rhythm moves and such as the carnival moves, to such extent, where there's a shifting totality that leads to perceive the impossible unity, the absent locus, the center that has taken off yet is not there.

[00:36:23] Philip writes some really nice stuff on carnival as well, which we've engaged in the book. And just thinking about what you were saying, Shauna, I think perhaps the certain kind of way that we're interested in, in framing Carnival is this kind of ontological insecurity that ends up being enrolled in these debates.

[00:36:39] So the way in which it kind of works to disrupt the grasping hand, even as it's the product of it. But going back to what we were discussing earlier. And I think you've probably perfectly illustrated this, Shauna, with your way in which the kind of improvisation gets captured. Is there a liberatory force attached to this?

[00:36:59] The Landship is pretty much dying out in Barbados. It was very central to the emergence of social welfare organizations in the early 1900s, late 1800s, emerged, analytically speaking, you could say it was quite similar to Carnival in terms of the creolization framing that could go on. But there's a commodification quite quickly that perhaps illustrates precisely the point..

[00:37:22] ..that the liberatory force of undoing, it may be precisely what's captured, as it were.

[00:37:28] **David Chandler:** Yes, maybe like carnival is read in so many different ways, it's been so important for different political projects and programs. But to my mind, in terms of the Anthropocene, there's a certain sense that it's like an all day, every day ontological carnival, you know, where the positions are reversed, where the mushrooms and the microbes..

[00:37:47] ..Have all the power, and you know, humans are subordinate to mercy. It's that sort of imaginary, that's a deconstructive imaginary, of course, that permanent carnivore's process of opening and of disrupting. This sort of problem, I feel, like all these deconstructive imaginaries. It's sort of problematic because the mushrooms and the microbes aren't really ruling.

[00:38:09] It's, it's a governing imaginary and humans are still ruling other humans, just through a different imaginary of like, how we should be conforming, behaving, thinking about the mediated links and these sorts of things. And so I sort of feel that different conceptual frameworks, different times, different imaginaries play different roles.

[00:38:29] And obviously we have our different interests and our different disciplines as well. But I sort of think that thinking through the use of carnival as deconstruction and the work that that does in different conceptual frameworks is sort of where I'm thinking about it. I mean, what an, what an amazing thing.

[00:38:46] And as you say, the empirics of it, the historical differences, you know, you can just see how that will become such an important paradigm to work in and think through.

[00:38:56] **Jonathan Pugh:** I mean, there is the argument that a number of Caribbean writers made when Derrida came out that we were doing

deconstruction a long time before you, and I think there's something in that and extremely interesting to think through those parallels I guess at some point. But Shuana, I really appreciate the way you describe that, it's such food for thought that history and yet do you not find it just repeats itself that kind of history, that repeating island, as it were.

[00:39:19] You know, I've come back to Benito Rojo more recently. I know I wasn't sure if he fell out of favor, but we found him extremely useful for our *Abyssal* book. In terms of just really getting to that improvisational thing, the undoing of stuff and the way in which, yeah, the cuts and distinctions constantly repeat themselves and are forged through the Caribbean and in a way that I just found so fascinating about the ways you were describing Barbados and Trinidad Carnival.

[00:39:44] **Andrew Culp:** It also strikes me that as much as things have changed, you know, Fanon writing *Wretched of the Earth* and in the 60s, it feels like we're still asking similar questions, though maybe asking them even harder or deeper or with more tragedy or concern, because it seems like the negative gesture of the anti colonial is still here. We know that's where things have to begin. But then the question of the post colonial and how that moment of transition from things being withheld or restricted, this absolute gratuitous violence of the colonial regime, and then how to really escape it and what happens beyond? What's that transition?

[00:40:23] Does it mean just recapturing things within a national culture? Does it mean to rule or rule differently or not even rule at all? And how might cultural traditions that come out of a moment of rebellion and uprising and resistance that are maybe even just negative gestures like marronage, where, you know, you escape, or maybe even this sort of like relative escape where you're helping others escape in the process. What do you do when you've all escaped?

[00:40:49] What happens in that future? Is, is there a positive gesture? Do you renew those older traditions or is there something else that has to happen? You know, I think that I've been writing recently about how we need to sit in that

moment of negation because maybe it's just not as deep or as complete as we really think that it is, that simply just affording people civil and political rights isn't enough to really undo these whole worlds of violence.

[00:41:10] **Jonathan Pugh:** No, in fact, the opposite, in my opinion. The awarding of rights, whether it's through a relation, a political relation, an ethical relation, a legal relation, as the constitutions of Barbados in 1966 perfectly illustrated, is precisely a recuperation of Blackness. And perhaps also, as is some of the other stuff we were talking about as well, and I think, as you were doing, I think you probably started to describe there what we're trying to think through with the motive metapolitical critique, you know, trying to sit a bit more with that. I'm not sure, I don't know what David thinks about the word negativity. It's kind of been used in a lot of different ways lately. I think maybe used so much, a bit like with non-relation, that we're trying to think through other ways in which we could frame these debates.

[00:41:56] But I think we see our task as sitting with it, as you were saying, you know, trying to develop figurative positions that enable us to sit with it, that perhaps don't become over celebratory, over affirmational, over celebratory. And we've done a lot of work on the Anthropocene in that regard. And perhaps we're now turning to certain aspects that are turned into the non-ontological and thinking through how perhaps also some of those are a little bit over celebratory as well.

[00:42:21] **David Chandler:** I prefer abyssal, the negative stuff, surprisingly enough. And, and we sort of rehearsed some of the reasons. I mean, I mean, Harmon does enough work for anyone to think through that what happens in the granting of rights is merely that you're not oppressed, in a way that like the capitalist liberal state recognizes a division like that, but nothing necessarily changes.

[00:42:46] And that's why the problems are metapolitical rather than political. And then that sort of relates to the problems of the world and the subject and the limitations of deconstruction, because the deconstructionist imaginary is really an [00:43:00] imaginary that politics understood as forms of representation of knowledge as well as a form of politics, is the barrier and that underneath that, there's something else.

[00:43:09] So the idea of maroonage or freedom from, in our contemporary moment, does a lot of work for not necessarily the same sort of projects that we here might necessarily be involved in. And to my mind, it's those ways of thinking that are like so crucial. And you're always caught in the trap of critiquing, being negative, deconstructing, and, you know, and before you know it, you're just so born to the microbes and the mushrooms or, whatever the imaginary of the world is. Which is why the programmatic distancing from that, Laruelle's project, the given politics, given reality.

[00:43:46] That's really what I think.. there's people like myself, maybe other people, are sort of are looking for in these discussions. I'm not trying to do critical Black studies or make points within it, but I'm thinking that there is a desperate shortage of critical engagement, which matches the contemporary situation where there isn't a political subject available.

[00:44:06] But that doesn't mean that we just have to pretend that the world is going to do the work instead of humans. That's not going to happen. And that's, to me, is the crux of where we are.

[00:44:15] **Jonathan Pugh:** I was just going to add very briefly to that. There's a certain technique evolving as well in kind of the more affirmational debates, the more generative celebratory debates, that labels the kind of more metapolitical critique as something that's insufficient. And it's a very nice way of kind of annulling critique. We just need to get on and focus on the celebration of the world, yeah? And I think the lure of the world, as David was saying, is precisely the

problem. The world is the problem. And to focus on the world as this generative thing that just keeps giving forces of non relation, forces of relation, ungraspable forces, might be precisely the problem. And I think Shauna's, I'm just going to repeat this, I think Shauna's description was just wonderful of that history. It couldn't have demonstrated it better, the way in which the improvisation gets constantly recouped. And I don't think just sitting in improvisation is necessarily the answer to resist that.

[00:45:09] **Shauna Rigaud:** Thank you, Jonathan and David for this conversation today. I think that and, and the book, as a way for us to think about the kinds of thought that folks have come both to the Caribbean with, and about the Caribbean, for having sort of . . . thinking about subject making and ideas of modernity. I think this is a great place for us to start thinking about, sort of broadly as well.

[00:45:40] **Andrew Culp:** On behalf of the CSA and the Positions podcast. I just want to thank David and Jonathan for taking the time to talk with us today. It's been incredibly generous thinkers. And I think that this conversation was quite excellent. On behalf of the Cultural Studies Association and Positions Podcast, enormous thank you to our guests today, and also a special shout out to the production team, including Mark, Elaine, and many others, and look forward to more podcasts coming soon. Thank you so much.

Credits

Produced by Mark Nunes and Elaine Venter.

Hosted by Andrew Culp.

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[Editors' note: This work has undergone post-publication peer review through a published scholarly commentary and public comments.]

Notes

1. The "Anthropocene" concept originated in the geological sciences, but was quickly reterritorialized into a range of other scientific and cultural debates. Those taking up non-human agency, the "ontological turn," and the deconstruction of the "human" are the focus for Jonathan Pugh and David Chandler, but they represent just one part of a much broader discourse. See Jonathan Pugh and David Chandler, *The World as Abyss: The Caribbean and Critical Thought in the Anthropocene* (London: University of Westminster Press, 2023) <https://doi.org/10.16997/book72> < <https://doi.org/10.16997/book72>> ; Paul J. Crutzen, "The 'Anthropocene'" in *Earth System Science in the Anthropocene*, eds. Eckart Ehlers and Thomas Krafft (Berlin/Heidelberg: Springer-Verlag, 2006), 13–18, https://doi.org/10.1007/3-540-26590-2_3 < https://doi.org/10.1007/3-540-26590-2_3> ; Will Steffen, Jacques Grinevald, Paul Crutzen, and John McNeill. "The Anthropocene: Conceptual and Historical Perspectives," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society A: Mathematical, Physical and Engineering Sciences* 369, no. 1938 (March 13, 2011): 842–67, <https://doi.org/10.1098/rsta.2010.0327> < <https://doi.org/10.1098/rsta.2010.0327>> ; Simon L. Lewis and Mark A. Maslin, "Defining the Anthropocene," *Nature* 519, no. 7542 (March 2015): 171–80, <https://doi.org/10.1038/nature14258> < <https://doi.org/10.1038/nature14258>> ; Jedediah Purdy, *After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); and Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2018). 
2. Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (New York: Verso Books, 2015); Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg, "The Geology of Mankind? A Critique of the Anthropocene Narrative," *The Anthropocene Review* 1, no. 1 (April 2014): 62–69, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053019613516291> < <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053019613516291>> ; Janae Davis, Alex A. Moulton, Levi Van Sant, and Brian Williams, "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, ... Plantationocene?: A Manifesto for Ecological Justice in an Age of Global Crises," *Geography Compass* 13, no. 5 (May 2019): e12438, <https://doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12438> < <https://doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12438>> ; Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); Donna Haraway, Noboru Ishikawa, Scott F. Gilbert, Kenneth Olwig, Anna L. Tsing, and Nils Bubandt, "Anthropologists Are Talking – About the Anthropocene," *Ethnos* 81, no. 3

(May 26, 2016): 535–64, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2015.1105838> < <https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2015.1105838>> ; and Julia Adeney Thomas, "The Shock of the Anthropocene: The Earth, History, and Us," *Social History* 42, no. 3 (July 3, 2017): 458–60, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071022.2017.1320142> < <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071022.2017.1320142>> . 

3. Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Between Gaia and Ground: Four Axioms of Existence and the Ancestral Catastrophe of Late Liberalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021).



4. An exhaustive bibliography of this tendency is beyond the scope of this response, but germinal texts include: Bruno Latour, "Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene," *New Literary History* 45, no. 1 (2014): 1–18; Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400873548> < <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400873548>> ; and Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*. 

5. Pugh and Chandler's formulation resonates closely with the claims about "capitalist realism" that have circulated in cultural studies for more than a decade. See Pugh and Chandler, *The World as Abyss*, 92; and Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2009). 

6. Many critics would take issue with the stance advanced by Pugh and Chandler that there "isn't a political subject available" to respond to our "contemporary situation," even though most seem to grapple with the "seeming collapse of political possibilities" in relation to climate change. It is indeed the case that among critical, scientific, and even many activist voices, one often gets the sense that pessimism of the intellect has completely overwhelmed optimism of the will when it comes to climate change. Even so, a range of perspectives continue to emphasize the role of the working class and social movements as political agents. See Salvage Collective, *The Tragedy of the Worker: Towards the Proletarocene* (New York: Verso Books, 2021); Matthew T. Huber, *Climate Change as Class War: Building Socialism on a Warming Planet* (New York: Verso Books, 2022); Paul Hampton, *Workers and Trade Unions for Climate Solidarity: Tackling Climate Change in a Neoliberal World* (London: Routledge, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315732220> < <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315732220>> ; and Andreas Malm, *How to Blow Up a Pipeline* (New York: Verso Books, 2021). 

7. Povinelli, *Between Gaia and Ground*. 

8. Pugh and Chandler, *The World as Abyss*, 55–58. 

9. Pugh and Chandler, *The World as Abyss*, 58. 

10. While I use phrases from Latour here, I gesture at the broader tendency that Pugh and Chandler critique, of which Latour's approach is just one influential example. See Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, translated by Caroline Porter (Cambridge,

MA: Harvard University Press, 2012) and *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009). 

11. In mentioning some of these important tributaries to their thinking, I should mention that the critical watershed on which they draw in their syntheses and original critiques is truly vast. See Denise Ferreira Da Silva, *Unpayable Debt* (London: Sternberg Press, 2022) and Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257–337, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ncr.2004.0015> <<https://doi.org/10.1353/ncr.2004.0015>>. 
12. Pugh and Chandler, *The World as Abyss*, 2. 

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